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INDISPENSABLE AND UNDERAPPRECIATED?

Foreign workers in the agri-food sector in Poland



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The Buy Responsibly Foundation (BRF) is a nationwide organization focusing on sustainable development and environmental protection, responsible consumption and production, as well as respect for human rights and environmental principles in business. Our goal is to raise awareness of Polish citizens, and increase their ability to make environmentally and socially responsible consumer choices and to increase the influence of Polish consumers over Polish companies and global corporations in order to improve their environmental protection and human rights standards.

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“Our Food. Our Future” brings together 16 civil society organizations across Europe and the world. We build a strong coalition of young Europeans and work together in the pursuit of our common vision: a socially just and sustainable food system that is human rights-based and agroecological. A system in which food sovereignty is real, and all workers, especially migrants and women, are treated fairly and equally.

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An aerial photograph of a vineyard with rows of grapevines stretching across a hillside. In the background, a small village with several houses is visible under a cloudy, overcast sky. A large, semi-transparent pink geometric shape, resembling a stylized arrow or a speech bubble, is overlaid on the image, pointing towards the bottom left. The text 'EXECUTIVE SUMMARY' is centered within this pink shape in white, bold, uppercase letters.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Production in the agri-food sector, especially fruit and vegetable harvesting, is based on the access to seasonal labour. As shown by numerous examples, local workers are usually not interested in doing jobs often referred to as 3D – dirty, demanding and dangerous. The automation and robotization processes, although increasingly advanced, tend to remain unattainable to family farms, which still constitute the vast majority in this sector. The solution for employers struggling to secure manpower is to recruit foreign workers. Strongly motivated by economic factors, foreigners accept precarious conditions of employment, its instability and low wages. The situation is similar for food businesses, which are becoming a workplace that is attracting increasing numbers of foreigners. For many immigrants, employment in the agri-food sector is an entry strategy into the host country's labour market, while for the remaining group such work still is a consciously chosen way of functioning in this market.

The situation of foreign seasonal workers in Poland stands out against this background. In the last ten or fifteen years, mostly due to an intense influx of workers from Ukraine, Poland has become a new immigration destination. As early as 2017, with more than a million temporary economic immigrants, Poland became the leader in this respect among the developed (OECD) countries. This was possible because of the liberal regulations concerning the employment of workers from culturally close countries (mostly Ukraine, Russia, Belarus). This process, however, was not accompanied by the development of organizations defending the rights of seasonal workers, especially those employed in rural areas. Due to the specific nature of the work itself, the place where it is performed and the highly informal nature of employment relations, foreign seasonal workers remain a group that is not easy to study. Thus, it is also difficult to offer them support and advocacy or provide them with information about their rights.

The main part of this report consists of the results of original field research conducted among Ukrainian workers employed in fruit harvesting and food businesses. Interviews with 20 people (including two Polish workers) took place between October 2022 and January 2023. In addition, the report includes materials collected during a participant observation in the Grójec county in 2022 and interviews with several fruit farmers.

The results of the research shed light on the situation of foreign workers in the agri-food sector in Poland both in static and dynamic terms. By capturing the context before the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as during the pandemic and at the time of the war in Ukraine, the research provides a unique opportunity to look at how these extraordinary circumstances affected the employment conditions of Ukrainians. Below is a summary of the key issues that emerged during the research.

Coming to Poland: The Ukrainians interviewed emphasized that the main motivation for coming to work in Poland was their difficult economic situation in their home country and the need to earn money for a specifically defined purpose (e.g. surgery, children's education, paying off debts). Those coming to Poland for work for the first time are usually accompanied by an acquaintance. They are also often assisted by private carriers who take them to a specific employer. **Finding the first job in Poland:** For the vast majority of those surveyed, a job in agriculture was their first gainful employment after arriving in Poland. It is not only unskilled people or those running their own farms in Ukraine who decide to work in this sector, but also teachers, nurses or other immigrants with higher education. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the high demand for workers in, for example, strawberry picking, a popular strategy was for people with full-time employment in Ukraine to arrive in Poland on

the basis of a biometric passport, take up work here without a contract for 2-3 weeks and then return to their home country.

Strategies in the labour market in Poland: Although conceived as temporary, working in agriculture remains a permanent strategy for functioning in Poland for some of the Ukrainians interviewed. Owing to the more lasting relationships built with employers, some workers were employed for the following months in nearby food companies after the end of the harvesting season. Importantly, foreign workers in the agri-food sector are often characterized by multi-employment, undertaking two different jobs on the same day.

The role of intermediaries in organizing labour: Private carriers are a key actor in organizing circular migrations to rural areas in Poland. Their role is not just to transport people, but above all to help them find jobs and offer workers important support in emergency situations. Employment agencies are much less important in recruiting for seasonal work in agriculture, and the employers surveyed are not willing to use their services. The situation is different for employees finding work with food companies where recruitment through temporary employment agencies is the dominant model.

Working time and the daily organization of work: The daily rhythm of seasonal work on farms is strongly influenced by the weather and the cycle of fruit and vegetable ripening. The time when work starts and its duration depend on the type of task, but the working day usually begins early in the morning (in the case of strawberry picking, just at dawn) and can last for more than ten hours. Workers can count on an hour (sometimes two hours) break around midday. The work is usually performed six days a week, although it may be as many as seven in peak season. Greater standardization is noted in food companies, where working time is generally 8-12 hours a day. However, respondents admitted that during periods of higher demand, they sometimes worked much longer than 12 hours a day. Relationships in the workplace: A characteristic feature of seasonal agricultural work, especially on smaller farms, is that certain jobs are performed jointly by employers and hired foreigners. As the research

shows, this helps to build more lasting relationships and has a positive impact on the workers' situation. In particular, numerous privileges and good treatment can be enjoyed by those workers who come to work for the same employer for a number of years. As far as relations among the employees themselves are concerned, the interviewees pointed to various types of conflict situations – usually motivated by jealousy – that often occur in the workplace or at workers' lodgings. More neutral relations seem to prevail in food companies.

Remuneration: The amount and certainty of remuneration are key dimensions of employment conditions that are of primary importance for foreign workers in the sector surveyed. Most often, however, these workers receive minimum wages (on hourly or monthly basis), but when comparing them with wages in Ukraine, they do not reject these conditions. Importantly, the scale of wages sometimes varies widely, and this is influenced, among other things, by the adoption of a piecework model for fruit harvesting. As the interviews clearly show, this is the predominant method of remuneration for soft fruit pickers. Here, the amount of daily wages depends on the amount of fruit harvested and the abundance of the crop. This solution is favoured both by employers, hoping to increase the productivity of their workers, and by the workers themselves, who try to use it to maximize their profits. A much more regulated model for the remuneration of foreign workers is in place in food companies, where workers' experience is the main determinant of wages.

Housing conditions: All the workers surveyed were guaranteed accommodation at the premises on the employer's farm and did not pay for their lodgings. Such an arrangement affects the quality of the housing conditions offered. Although employers try to improve its standard, toilets or bathrooms are still sometimes located in another building. Overcrowding remains a challenge in this type of accommodation, and so does lack of intimacy. In the case of factories, due to the lack of infrastructure, foreign workers live away from where they work, often at workers' hostels or in apartments rented for this purpose, with the rent being deducted from their wages.



Fot. Kamil Matuszczyk

Food: The intensity of daily work on the farms means that workers have limited options to prepare meals. While until a few years ago employers usually guaranteed full board to their employees, now due to cutting costs they generally do not provide them with prepared meals but just with some selected foodstuffs, mostly potatoes and other vegetables, sometimes bread. Supplying workers with drinking water can also be a problem. The situation is different in food companies, where, as the research has shown, production workers can usually count on hot meals and/or free food products produced at the factory.

Accidents at work and occupational health and safety: Despite the high rate of accidents at work in the agri-food sector, the workers surveyed did not personally experience any serious accidents during their employment in Poland. On the one hand, they were aware of accidents that happened to other workers, on the other they expressed a conviction that fruit picking

is a safe occupation. Employers on the farms do not tend to provide detailed training for seasonal workers on occupational health and safety. It is different in food companies, where safety training is obligatory for all the employees.

A new reality after February 2022: The context of seasonal migrations to Poland and the situation of Ukrainian workers changed profoundly in 2022 due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Many regular workers, mostly men, did not make it to the farms. The problem of finding people willing to work in fruit and vegetable harvesting has also increased greatly. Regardless, working conditions for Ukrainians in the agri-food sector did not suddenly improve. Rather, the research revealed the emergence of new challenges related to forced migration, such as the presence of children of Ukrainian female workers in rural areas who remain outside the education system and also help with seasonal work.



Recommendations:

In recent years, seasonal employment in the agri-food sector in Poland has been dominated by workers from across the eastern border, especially from Ukraine, but this has not eliminated the ever-growing problem of labour shortages. In view of the new challenges, employers are consciously changing their strategies towards foreign workers, especially in terms of the working conditions and accommodation offered. Although the situation has improved in many respects, there is a need to initiate further long-term solutions that, on the one hand, ensure a steady inflow of the necessary number of economic migrants and, on the other, guarantee them decent employment conditions. Various stakeholders should be involved in this task, not only public institutions and social partners, but also the workers themselves, the media or local community leaders. Also, an important role in these processes is certainly to be played by movements and initiatives for conscious and ethical consumption, which can indirectly counteract negative phenomena and practices in the agri-food sector, also with regard to the situation of foreign workers.

Some of the key recommendations put forward in the report are:

- 1 Steps should be taken to amend the provisions governing the harvest assistance contract so that employers using it are obliged to provide seasonal workers with meals and refreshments, and one day off per week, as well as to take appropriate health and safety measures.
- 2 Seasonal workers should be encouraged and enabled to report all kinds of abuse and examples of mistreatment by employers or other coworkers.
- 3 Relevant institutions and organizations should reach out to the media, both local and national, on the subject of violations of workers' rights and publicize such cases connected with seasonal agricultural work.
- 4 Employers should keep improving the standard of accommodation for seasonal workers as well as offer them decent wages for their work and be made aware of tangible benefits resulting from introducing such solutions.
- 5 It is worth promoting and rewarding employers who raise the standards for the employment of seasonal workers in the agri-food sector, e.g. through sectoral competitions or the awarding of certificates.
- 6 Non-governmental organizations working with trade unions, the National Labour Inspectorate (PIP) and the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund (KRUS) should do more to address the issue of foreign workers employed in rural areas.
- 7 Farmers should be encouraged to take greater care of occupational health and safety issues and the accommodation of foreign workers.



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